

Erin S. Hensley

May 3, 2009, 9:00 AM

John 10:11-18

On the Occasion of the Dedication of the New Kneelers for Children's Church

### The Good Shepherd as Challenge and Comfort

I don't know about you, but I can never seem to get enough of this morning's gospel. I hear the familiar words and think to myself, "Tell me again how Jesus will care for me. Tell me again how God in Christ is a good shepherd, who does not put his own interests first, but puts me first." I offer a quick prayer of thanks: "Lord Jesus, thank you for not running away from the wolves. Thank you for staying and protecting me." For virtually anyone who grew up in any Christian denomination, we find this morning's image the good shepherd as one of comfort.

Especially if we are ordained persons, teachers, parents, or grandparents, we hear the words from Jesus as an invitation to be like the good shepherd. We hear Jesus' powerful words of sacrifice- "And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:15b-16). We hear these words and tell ourselves "Okay, I need to give and give. I do not need to think of myself. I am supposed to help everyone get along. I am the one who needs to make sure everyone has their fill of luscious clover." In this interpretation, people in various leadership roles hear a call to virtual martyrdom. The "followers" can then give thanks to God for reminding the leaders to check their egos at the door.

One scholar poignantly notes that "nowhere in this [morning's Gospel reading] are any who follow Jesus depicted as shepherds or even assistant shepherds."<sup>1</sup> Let me say this insight again, "nowhere in this morning's Gospel reading are any who follow Jesus depicted as shepherds or even assistant shepherds. In other words, we are all sheep. We all have gifts to give, lessons to learn. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the one whose primary concern is for the entire world. Jesus is the one who always cares for and never neglects the sheep. Jesus is the one who freely chooses to give his all for all.

We are all sheep. You and I, lay and ordained, are both sheep. Young and old, humble and proud, doctors and receptionists, janitors and judges are sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the one through whom and with whom we gather as a flock. Jesus is the one whose voice we are called to hear clearly. Jesus is the one whose voice we are called to respond to with care. We are all sheep. Only Jesus Christ, God incarnate, is the Good Shepherd.

We want to be like the Good Shepherd; we want to teach children well and train them in the way they should go. We want to care for friends and do our best to love our enemies. The desire to be like the Good Shepherd is not in itself problematic. Being like the Good

---

<sup>1</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in The New Interpreter's Bible, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9:672.

Shepherd becomes a problem when we think being Christian is primarily about taking care of everyone as if we are **the** Good Shepherd.

Are we called to care for one another? Of course! Are we called to listen to each other's voices and the voices of cultures and histories that influence us? Of course! As people in leadership roles, are we called to renounce privilege for the sake of the other and to live simply so that others may simply live? Of course!

But our identity as sheep of the Good Shepherd is not dependent on how well or how much we listen to the shepherd. Our identity as sheep is rooted in Jesus' identity as the Good Shepherd, in Jesus' loving kindness for you, me, and every single person on this planet, especially those we can't stand or understand.

Perhaps your heart beats with joy at the thought of all people being that precious. Perhaps anger rages like a river at the very thought of such an idea. After all, if everyone is a sheep, you and I might listen more and talk less. If everyone is a sheep, we might take ourselves less seriously. We might get to know others because we don't always have the answer. We need help from others in the flock to listen carefully for the voice of the Good Shepherd. If I see myself as a sheep more than a shepherd, then I will consider my capacity to hurt another member of the flock just as much as I consider my capacity to help. As you can see, the idea of all of us being sheep has implications for our life together as a flock. Living out these implications might be painful at times, but (as always) there is grace.

The grace is that the Good Shepherd does not gather us for the slaughter, but for life abundant. For clovers that actually have nourishment, for wounds that are healed not just stitched up, for clean water that refreshes not just flows. For all of this for all people, for all of creation.

Today, lovingly called Good Shepherd Sunday, is a little piece of humble pie, so to speak. A reminder that Jesus is not solely my Good Shepherd, but the Good Shepherd of all people.

In a few moments we will say prayers for ourselves and others. We will offer up the church, those in authority, those who are suffering, and those who have died to the Good Shepherd. We will do so with the help of newly stitched kneelers for children's church. Each of these kneelers illustrates a sacred story, a snapshot of how we like sheep have gone astray or listened to the voice of God.

Whether we stand or kneel during communion, whether we are young or old, we bend the knees of our hearts. We actively walk- sometimes skip or jump- to the altar to receive food and drink that sustains and renews us. We go like sheep for direction, for a tangible reminder of the one who made us, saves us, and will never leave us, not just you or me, alone. There is both comfort and challenge in Jesus the Good Shepherd. Thanks be to God for both. *Amen.*